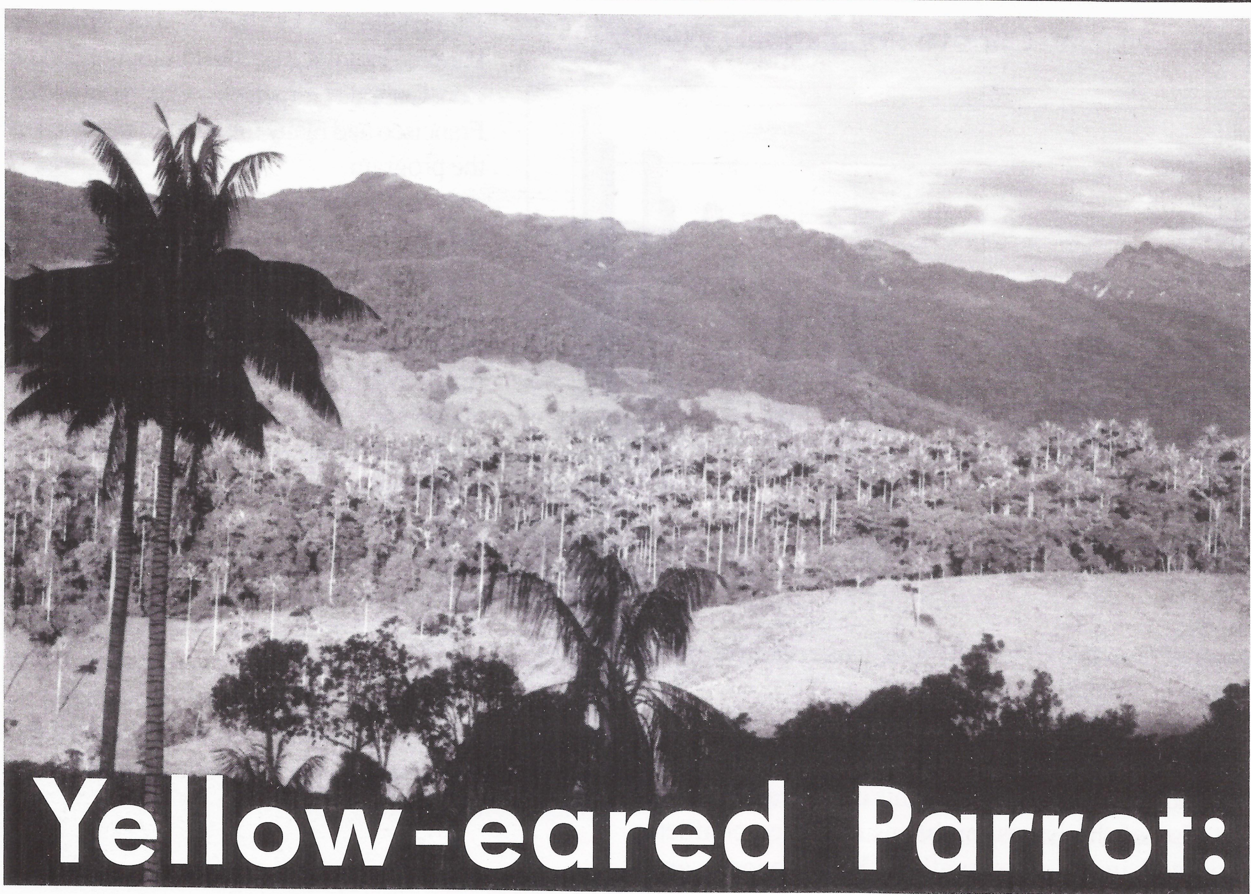


The valley in the Colombian Andes where the last population was found (Paul Salaman/ Proyecto Ognorhynchus).

Yellow-eared Parrot: New hope for its survival

Probably the last population discovered in Colombia

Since 1996, Loro Parque Fundación has been deeply involved in the efforts to save the Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis*. A project to protect the last known flock to exist in northern Ecuador was undertaken by the renowned ornithologist Niels Krabbe. However, the last confirmed report dates back to September 1998, so this population may have gone extinct. A second project to locate the species was mounted in the Colombian Andes by Paul Salaman and Bernabé López-Lanús, funded by Loro Parque Fundación. The field team was able to confirm the existence of another population, which greatly improves the conservation prospects for the species. To date, Loro Parque Fundación has supported the conservation of the Yellow-eared Parrot with over US$ 65,000 (US$ 56,244 to Ecuador; US$ 10,000 to Colombia). Paul Salaman, Project Director of *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* in Colombia, summarises the history of the protection efforts for the species.

In the early 1900's, the magnificent Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* - a large brilliant green and yellow parrot - was abundant across the High Andes of Colombia and northern Ecuador. However, by the 1980's it was clear the species' population was catastrophically declining, as large flocks started disappearing at an alarming rate. In the mid-1990's, the species had mysteriously vanished with only two flocks of similar size - one in Ecuador, another in Colombia and numbering less than 50 individuals in total - reported to survive.

Little was known about the natural history of the Yellow-eared Parrot - which forms a unique monotypic genus - except that it was highly nomadic, moving large distances across the Andes in search of seasonal fruiting booms. It only appeared that it was dependant for nesting, feeding and roosting on wax palms *Ceroxylon* spp. - including the national tree of Colombia, *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, being the world's tallest palm standing over 40 metres high. As the forests and its' food supply disappeared so did the parrots. However, the "nail in the coffin" for the

Yellow-eared Parrot came in the form of illegal collecting and hunting. Global trade in parrots has threatened the survival of many parrot species, with increasing scarcity fuelling spiralling rewards and pressures for their capture. In Colombia, between 1992 to 1996 nearly half of the 1,540 birds confiscated from people trying to illegally smuggle them out of Colombia were parrots. Perhaps 50 times this number avoided confiscation. Although millions of people world-wide keep parrots as pets, there is no known Yellow-eared Parrot surviving outside of the wild. It was until recently that we discovered why. Despite active trapping for the pet trade, the species' extremely social behaviour and group devotion appear to be a precursor to a rapid death when placed into caged solitary confinement. For example, of one flock of 60 Yellow-eared Parrots in Ecuador, a farmer illegally trapped 40 in the late 1980's, of which half died within one day and the remaining 20 died the following day.

In response to the increasingly grave situation of the species, Niels Krabbe launched a conservation project for the last known flock in Ecuador in 1996. This project was successful in locating the species for short periods in north-west Ecuador and conservation activities were enacted. Three tracts of lands were purchased - including the roost site to which the flock seemed to return regularly - and consequently reforested with native trees, particularly including species that are relevant as food for the parrot. Unfortunately, the species nomadic movements in the region have prevented any detailed information on the species' biology and ecology from being collected. Sadly, the last sighting in Ecuador of the Yellow-eared Parrot was of a pair in September 1998, despite continuing searches for it.

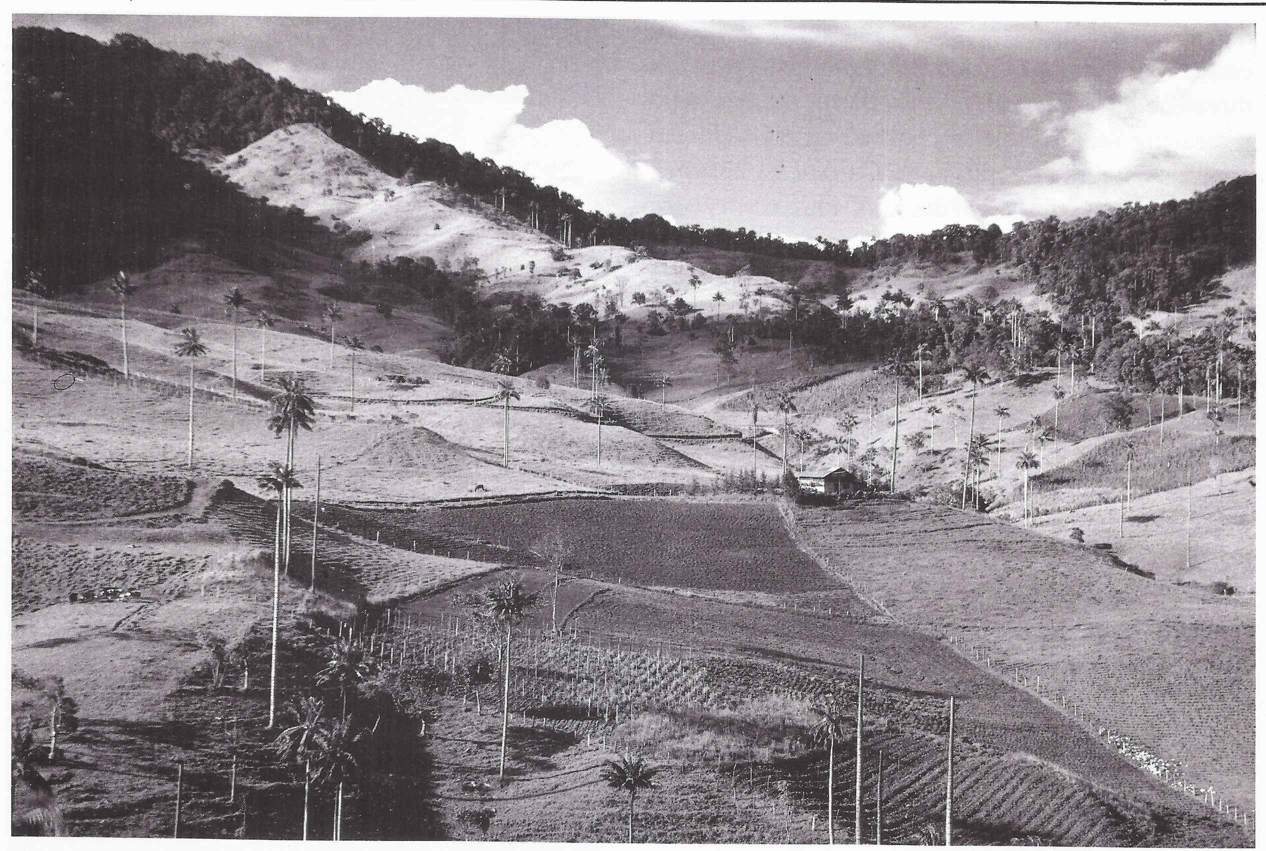
In October 1997, Paul Salaman had observed a flock of 24 Yellow-eared Parrot's in central Colombia. Early the following year, Paul Salaman and Niels Krabbe instigated "*Proyecto Ognorhynchus*", as an emergency response to study and protect the species at this locality. Fieldwork was conducted by Bernabé López-Lanús since June 1998, with the aim of locating the species and thereafter determining the ecological requirements, distribution and status in order to assess threats and formulate a conservation strategy. Focussing on the species historical stronghold in the Central Andes, searches and a poster campaign with regional environmental government bodies were conducted, and farmers asked to report on any sightings of the species. Eleven months fieldwork and over 3,500 field hours accumulated in the search of *O. icterotis* in the largest surviving wax palm remnants in the Colombian Andes proved fruitless. Despite promising reports by local people, the species was considered to have abandoned this historical "stronghold". Its' survival looked increasingly bleak, also in Colombia.

Thus, by early 1999, this unique parrot had completely vanished; the traditional haunts had been either



The poster distributed during the search for the species in Colombia (Paul Salaman/Proyecto Ognorhynchus).


Look over the deforested valley from the roost site in Ecuador.



View over the valley with the roost site in Colombia (Paul Salaman/Proyecto Ognorhynchus).

deforested or mindless hunting had exterminated the last known birds. As if overnight, the Yellow-eared Parrot had become one of the most critically endangered species in the America's. With no further reports and not a single individual in captivity, the worst was feared. Almost 100 years after the Caroline Parakeet's extinction in the wild, it appeared that yet another precious member of the parrot family had all to suddenly slipped into oblivion, tragically on the dawn of a new millennium.

As our search was about to end, a Colombian having seen the campaign poster reported a sighting of the species. Project Ognorhynchus fieldworker, Bernabé López-Lanús, investigated the claim from a remote valley of central Colombia. Wandering through glades of majestic wax palms on the late afternoon of 18th April 1999, Bernabé heard the faint but distinctive raucous screams of parrots. Then descending from the clouds above a breathtaking alpine-like landscape, two flocks of Yellow-eared Parrots swooped down in tightly synchronised barrel rolls into palm studded pasture fields. After almost a year of depressingly unsuccessful searches, Bernabé was delirious with ecstasy as a total of 61 Yellow-eared Parrots alighted in the towering wax palms overhead and clambered down the fronds in chattering masses to gorge on bundles of ripening thumb-sized palm fruit.

Over the coming months, a wealth of incredible information on the parrots ecology and natural history was gathered from round-the-clock observations. Within a week of rediscovering the two flocks, an additional flock was located roosting in an adjacent secluded valley. Occasionally all individuals would gather and socialise together before roosting the night in palms. Like standing in a children's kindergarten, pairs and small groups chattered, preened and frolicked amongst the palm groves, often flying within feet of us as they played without a care in the world. The Yellow-eared Parrot is an exceptionally social and strongly bonding species.

A total of 82 birds, including 24 adult pairs, roost every night in one of two wax palm locations (3 km apart) within the study site until this present date. A radio-transmitter (collar type) was safely attached to one individual in late June, and continues to provide daily locality data for one flock. As if things couldn't get any more exciting, a nest with a chick being fed by adults situated deep within a dead wax palm cavity was discovered on 26 April and intensively studied until the adult pair and a cooperative breeding assistant successfully fledged one young on 9 June. The nest provided the first ever breeding biology data, which was supplemented in September with six additional active nests, signalling the second annual breeding cycle. Two nests have each used a cooperative breeding assistant - the first example for the New World Psittacids. The Yellow-eared Parrot has a varied diet although it feeds extensively on wax palm *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, particularly on the ripe palm

fruits around the roost locations. At dawn, the three flocks disperse far into highland forest on the main ridge of the Central Cordillera, before slowly returning, feeding at lower elevations and arriving at the roost site by mid-afternoon.

The Yellow-eared Parrot's utter dependence on the wax palm is emphasised by the study results. Few bird species have such a complete dependency with a single species of plant, as Yellow-eared Parrot on the wax palm for breeding, roosting and feeding. This gives great concern as Colombia's National tree is now restricted to only three small pockets in the Cordillera Central, with palm recruitment virtually non-existent as cattle graze on seedling palms, whilst adult palm mortality is accelerating for unknown reasons.

After a year of searching in Colombia and in adjacent Ecuador, it appears that we had uncovered the final enclave of the Yellow-eared Parrot. But why this single population survived was a mystery. Interestingly, the group is dominated by immature birds so that the population had been increasing rapidly in recent years, but from a tiny base - perhaps just a handful of adults. In the past, the Yellow-eared Parrot was heavily exploited by local people, being trapped and young excavated from nests, despite a poor survival rate in captivity. Historical signs of damaged nesting palms to steal chicks and stories by the community of actively hunting the parrot for food, tell the tale of a species almost driven to extinction at this site.

Then, at a decisive moment, the Colombian guerrilla stepped in to prohibit the commercialisation and/or capture of the Yellow-eared Parrot and other wildlife in the region. Under a strict *modus operandi*, inhabitants strictly heed the ban so that the long-time threat from hunting has waned in this area. Ironically, owing to the rebel prohibition, the Yellow-eared Parrot has become a beneficiary of Colombia's civil conflict.

Sadly, this prohibition is neither permanent nor



Close-up of the first mist-netted and radio-tagged Yellow-eared Parrot (Paul Salaman/Proyecto Ognorhynchus).



Two Yellow-eared Parrots at the nest (Bernabé López-Lanús/ Proyecto Ognorhynchus).

may stop determined poachers. Furthermore, its long-term survival is precariously in the balance as the wax palm - it so enormously depends upon - is itself in danger of extinction, with just a few thousand acres of groves remaining. Hence, Proyecto Ognorhynchus is raising funds to implement a multifaceted conservation action plan, involving Loro Parque Fundación, and other funding partners, Colombian NGO's and local community organisations, with:

- land purchase to permanently protect the principal breeding colony and roost locations,
- reforestation with palms and other feeding plants – in purchased land and using a
- land stewardship scheme for farmers to set-aside land for regeneration and reforestation,
- environmental education and local community involvement - essential for effective protection.
- sustained local, regional and international publicity campaign.

The project has completed numerous radio interviews, Colombian TV presentations, published seven scientific articles and an international Associated Press release in July 1999 that was published in many major daily papers throughout the world.

Proyecto Ognorhynchus continues to intensify field research, especially in breeding biology and movements using radio-transmitters together with ecology on wax palms. Fortunately, we have the



Field team with Bernabé Lopéz-Lánus, Carlos, Martha Lucia and Paul Salaman (Paul Salaman/Proyecto Ognorhynchus).

enormous co-operation and enthusiasm of farmers, local communities and regional government agencies, so that an action plan can now commence.

The race is on to save the Yellow-eared Parrot and ensure its' place with us in the new millennium.

Proyecto Ognorhynchus is presently sponsored by Loro Parque Fundación, Zoological Society for the Protection of Species and Populations, and the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund through American Bird Conservancy. For further information on the project please consult <www.proaxis.com/~salaman>. The proposal for the protection of the species for the next year of funding amounts to above US$ 100,000, and encompasses ongoing research, community work, and the protection and purchase of the land where the last Yellow-eared Parrot flock occurs. For contributions to the project, please contact us at Loro Parque Fundación. ❑

Current parrot field conservation projects of Loro Parque Fundación:

* Brazil: Recovery of the Spix's Macaw *Cyanopsitta spixii*
* Brazil: Environmental education programme for the Red-tailed Amazon *Amazona brasiliensis* in Superagüi National Park, Paraná
* Brazil: Ecology and distribution of the Vinaceous Amazon *Amazona vinacea* in Paraná
* Bolivia: Armonia - Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis*
* Ecuador: Cerro Blanco Bosque Protector - Lilacine Amazon *Amazona autumnalis* & Guayaquil Macaw *Ara ambigua guayaquilensis*
* Ecuador: Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* I
* Colombia: Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* II
* Zambia: Status, ecology and conservation biology of the Black-cheeked Lovebird *Agapornis nigrigenis*
* Thailand: Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary
* Philippines: Red-vented Cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia* Conservation Programme
* Indonesia: Action Sampiri - Red-and-blue Lory *Eos histrio*
* Indonesia: Kakatua Seram - Moluccan Cockatoo *Cacatua moluccensis*

CYANOPSITTA

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Editorial Office:
Loro Parque S.A.
38400 Puerto de la Cruz
Tenerife, Canary Islands
Spain
Tel.: + 34 922 374081
Fax: + 34 922 375021
E-mail: <loroparque@jet.es>
<dir.general@loroparque-fundacion.org>
Website: <www.loroparque-fundacion.org>

Editorial Committee:
Wolfgang Kiessling, Inge Feier, Yves de Soye, Dr. Javier Almunia

IN THIS ISSUE:

Front Cover: Yellow-eared Parrots, *Ognorhynchus icterotis*, on a dead wax palm, Colombia; Photograph: Bernabé López-Lanús/Proyecto Ognorhynchus.
Back Cover: Parrot education sign - African Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus erithacus*

MEMBERSHIP:

Become a member of Loro Parque Fundación to support us in our activities. You will then receive our trimestral newsletter *Cyanopsitta*, as well as a supporter's card permitting free entry to Loro Parque during the validity of your membership. The current annual membership fees are:
Adults (non-resident): ....15,000 Ptas.
Adults (resident) & children (non-resident): ....7,500 Ptas.
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Message from the Founder

One might call it unreliable if we publish our newsletter with such huge delay, and additionally with two editions in one. I would like to apologise for this. However, I must mention that Loro Parque Fundación always tries to minimise its costs, to be able to send financial resources destined for conservation directly to the field projects we support. As our efforts are directed more outwards than inwards, we also hesitate to contract new personnel to deal with such duties. This is a particularly exciting year for us, as we are in the middle of the final construction works for the world's largest penguin exhibit, which we hope to inaugurate on November 1st. All our thoughts revolve around this unique project. But also the meeting of the Spix's Macaw Committee and the congress of the Neotropical Ornithological Society in Mexico – where our presence was required – played an important role. We hope it will not happen again, but I equally hope that everyone who now receives the present newsletter is able to recognise our dedication to the cause of the conservation of parrots and their habitats.

In this sense, it is my greatest pleasure that the Spix's Macaw Recovery Programme, which Loro Parque Fundación has now supported with nearly US$ 600,000, is showing excellent results. We are approaching the moment when birds from captivity can eventually be re-introduced to the wild, and I would like to here thank all the contributors to the project, which have so brilliantly helped the project. Let us hope that our immense endeavours will lead us to witness our greatest wish come true: many Spix's macaws returned to their natural life in the Brazilian caatinga.

My best wishes

Wolfgang Kiessling

Our Mission

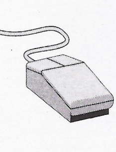
To promote the conservation of the natural environment by exposing people to the wonders of nature, educating them and encouraging their support; and further by supporting applied research, protection and management measures in the wild and responsible captive breeding programmes. To use parrots as a focus for conservation.

This Newsletter is for you

If you want to help protect the environment, learn about or update your knowledge of parrots and their welfare and conservation, keep in touch with our field projects and what is current at Loro Parque, this newsletter is for you.

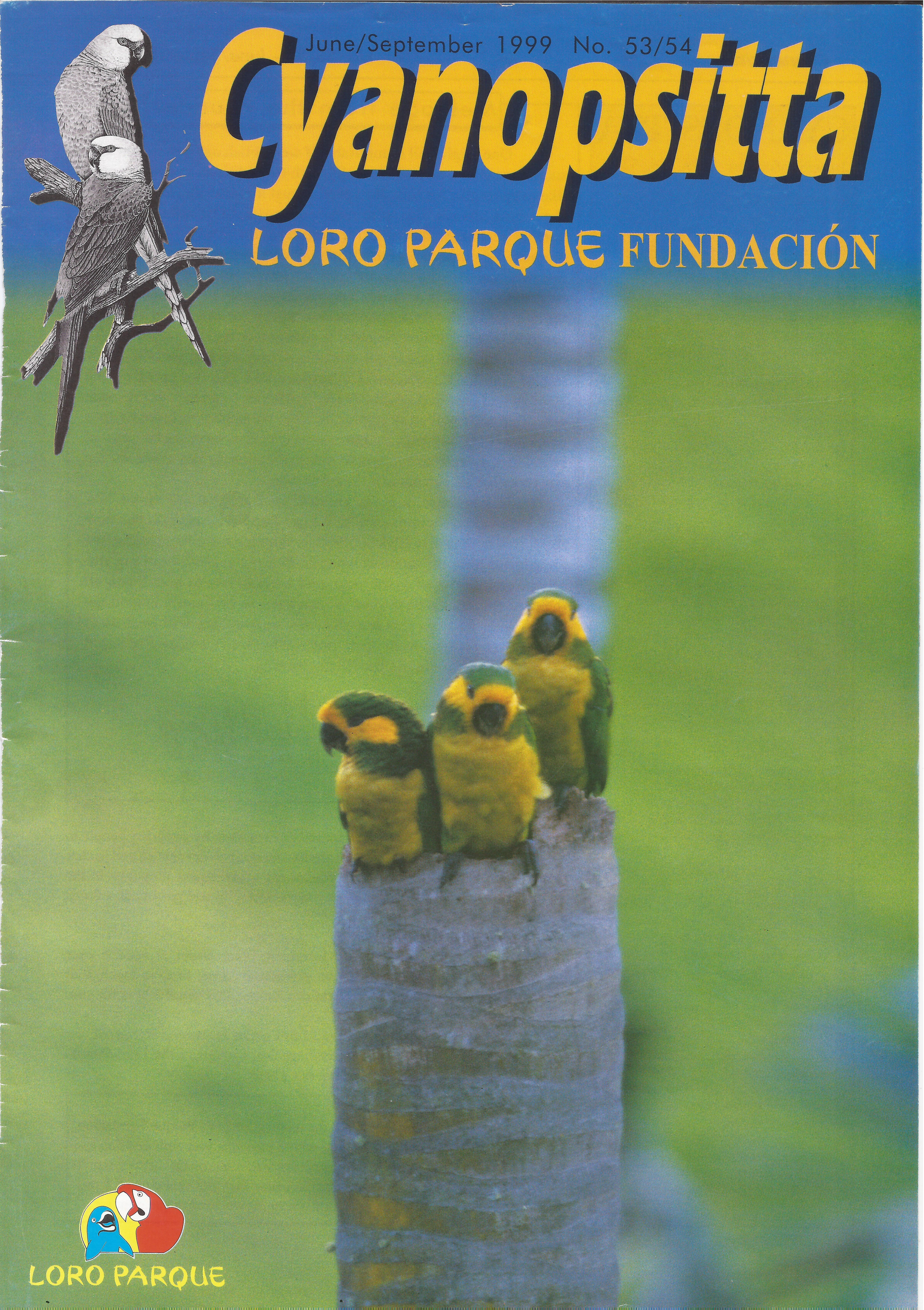
Cyanopsitta

Latin for blue parrot. The only member of this genus is *Cyanopsitta spixii*, the Spix's Macaw. It is a highly endangered species, symbol of the Loro Parque Fundación, and of the need to conserve our planet.



Visit our websites

Since September 1998, the website of Loro Parque Fundación has been fully operating, which provides you with detailed information on our programmes. Visit us at: <http://www.loroparque-fundacion.org>. For the website of Loro Parque, please check out: <http://www.loroparque.com>.


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Cyanopsitta
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